

Interview with Charlotte Bailey Temerario, former World War II Navy nurse and assigned to Navy hospital ship USS *Consolation* (AH-15). Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 25 August 2005. (1919-2018)

When did you join the Navy?

I joined the Navy on the 17th of November 1942 in Danville, Iowa. I went to Chicago for the physical. Before I had joined the Navy I had been in three states other than my home state of Iowa. Now I've been in 49 of the 50.

It took 3 days to get to San Diego. My friend Maury and I were roommates in the nurses quarters there. It was a pink stucco building. They called it the "Pink Elephant" but it was a wonderful hospital and very well planned. However, they hadn't planned it for World War II occupancy. We later had to enlarge it.

After I had been there 6 months, I was given 5 days leave. When I got back, our nurses quarters had been taken over for sick officers quarters. We nurses were billeted in Balboa Park, which was a series of buildings built for a World's Fair a number of years previous to that. But they hadn't been used very much. So I was billeted in a large room with seven other nurses. We had a great time getting along because somebody was on one of three shifts. So somebody was sleeping all the time and we had to be quiet. That was quite an adjustment.

When I got back after that 5-day leave I was given a work assignment of male patients that came to the nurses quarters a couple of hours in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon. They did odd jobs like watering the flowers and sweeping the patios, and little things we needed help with.

From San Diego I received orders to a new hospital in Pleasanton, CA. It was out in the middle of nowhere but we put it in order for patients. I was there for several months. However, when I'd worked in the nurses quarters in San Diego, the Chief Nurse used to say, "You are all doing such a fine job of adjusting these new quarters, I'm recommending you for a good assignment." I believe as a result of her recommendation, I was given orders for dispensary in the San Diego repair base. I think it was a submarine base.

We were routinely given a fitness report quarterly and asked our preference for next assignment. My only request always was hospital ships. When World War II started, the Navy had only two hospital ships--USS *Relief* and USS *Solace*.

After I was at the dispensary about 2 years, I received orders to the Naval Hospital in Seattle, WA, and was there about 4 months when I received orders to the USS *Consolation* (AH-15) in Brooklyn, NY. I was given a 10-day leave to get there so I stopped at my home in Iowa and then on to Brooklyn.

In the meantime, my brother had been in the Navy since August of 1942 and he was aboard a supply ship, the USS *Vega*. My younger sister had joined the WAVES. I think she was the second group. She was trained as a Link Trainer specialist and was stationed in Brooklyn. The Link Trainer was a small machine which tested pilots for night flying using only instruments, not looking out the window. At one point, she and I were both on leave, she on the East Coast, me from the West Coast and we met in Iowa. While we were home, she broke out in a rash. We met our family doctor and he diagnosed her with scarlet fever. He told us to stay home and not to visit relatives and neighborhood. I think we were at home about 5 days and then we each returned to our duty.

When my orders finally came for the USS *Consolation* in May 1945, there was quite a procedure to commission the ship. Since it was in Brooklyn, my younger sister was able to

attend. She knew the procedure of getting on and off the ship but I didn't. Nobody told us. But we learned to saluting the officer of the day and asking permission to leave the ship, which was granted, and we were recorded as leaving the ship. We then turned to the U.S. flag flying at the stern and saluted, then proceeded down the gangplank. Sometimes the gangplank was stairs and other times it was a series of boards with cross pieces on it so we had to watch our footing.

We had a wonderful chief nurse, Gertrude Nelson. And there were 28 nurses and 2 Red Cross women for a total of 30 living in the nurses' quarters. I was sixth in seniority of the nurses, as I remember. I was a lieutenant j.g. My roommate was also the same rank.

We were billeted, two in a room and according to seniority. My roommate was also a redhead and our room was about 12 feet square. The room had double-decked beds with two large drawers under the lower bunk. Alongside the beds were two sets of three drawers and a desk which pulled down for writing space. There were a couple of shelves above it. Inside the desk area was a small safe with our own combination for opening. As we entered the room, the bunks were on our right, and on our left was a small sink with a mirror. We went down the short hall for the bathroom and shower. I think there were two showers so two people could shower at the same time. Just beyond the sink and mirror was a built-in closet. From the sink to the exterior wall was one porthole. The floor was a heavy dark green linoleum. After the war when our staff was down to seven nurses, I had the room to myself. I bought some car wax, cleaned that floor, and waxed it. When the steward swabbed the deck he used a dirty swab and left dirty streaks and I reported him. On my ward the corpsmen were very clean. Sometimes they would take their swabs and tie them onto a rope and drag them in the saltwater and really clean them. And so the swabs on the ward didn't leave streaks.

On my ward, which was the lock ward of two psychiatric wards, I had 28 beds and three quiet rooms. The nurse's desk was in the quiet room area, which was outside the bunk area. I could sit at that desk and be aware of everything that went on the ward. Each ward had a compact linen room alongside a small kitchen, which was not a part of the ward and had to be entered through a door. The shower and bathroom for the patients was off the ward and staffed by a ward corpsman when in use. I had six corpsmen assigned to run that ward.

The officers had their own ward room and the nurses had their own smaller ward room alongside. We were seated at four tables, which were permanently affixed to the floor. Chairs hooked onto the table legs so that in rough weather they were anchored. We were seated according to seniority. The stewards brought food in serving dishes and we served ourselves on a plate in front of us. That way we took the amount we wanted. In extremely rough weather, we made no pretense at sitting down and eating formally; we just made sandwiches. There were always coffee pots and plain hot water for tea in the ward room.

Our chief nurse directed that when the officers were visiting in our ward room, we were to serve them coffee or whatever they wanted. And to put cream and sugar in the coffee according to their request. We were sociable but always officers and we treated anyone visiting as a visitor. One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was from our chief nurse, Gertrude Nelson. She said, "This is a man's Navy and to keep their respect do feminine things." So she sent us all ashore to get handwork. And just having learned the two basic stitches to knit, I purchased pale blue yarn with directions and pattern to knit a dress.

Really? Just because she said you had to have those skills?

Yes. Do feminine things. It took me 3 years to finish that dress. Aboard ship, only two people knew how to knit--the assistant chief nurse, who always knit tight, so I didn't want her to

knit my dress. I used my own relaxed stitches. The second person was the orthopedic surgeon whose mother taught him to knit. He knitted to keep his hands supple. I remember he knitted a gray vest. But he wasn't about to teach a nurse how to knit so I finished the dress in 3 years. But I wore it and wore it until I was tired of it and I gave it to my mother.

Our chief nurse was a gentle woman and guided us well. We did not have gossip about misbehaving. As far as I knew, nurses did not misbehave aboard our ship. We kept our reputations and were friends with everybody. I knew pretty much everybody aboard the ship. But we kept our distance and loved them all at a distance. Anyway, I felt very well respected. There were seven pianos and one organ in the mess hall and I played the piano. It was a great relief being able to play the songs I loved.

Our chief nurse asked us each to go ashore and shop for two gifts for nurses to be used for birthdays or Christmas, whatever. I was aboard 13 months. The ship had a shakedown cruise there at the beginning for 3 weeks, as I recall, after which we anchored in Portsmouth, VA. There were workman aboard so we were each given a 5-day leave and told to go ashore. So we lived in kind of a bed and breakfast house and were expected to attend three meals and seated according to rank and all the rest of it.

Being summer, I recall swimming in the ocean and loving it. That was new to me. I had learned to swim in the Mississippi but that was far different from the ocean.

We went back aboard the ship and took another shakedown cruise. By that time, we were finally off to the South Pacific. We went through the Panama Canal and stopped to shop in the city on the Atlantic as well as the city on the Pacific where I enjoyed going to a church where the front wall was all gold.

Going through the canal, we had to go up locks to the Gatun Lake. We sailed across it and then down locks to the Pacific Ocean. We continued on towards Hawaii and the South Pacific.

We went on to Hawaii. In the meantime, my brother was a sailor aboard the USS *Vega*. He had been out in the South Pacific and been at sea most of his time. His ship was not in Hawaii when we arrived but shortly thereafter there was a message from him that he would be over at 8 the next morning. I did get to see him, and with the chief nurse's permission, he came to the ward room for coffee and a short tour of the ship. I think he was aboard about 15 minutes and then hurried back to his ship and then on back to the States.

We were 1 day out of Hawaii when the war ended, which was August 14th, I believe. Then we went on to Japan.

How did you hear that the war had ended?

We had radio contact with various ships and with land so we kept in good contact as to what was going on with the war. That night, I remember . . . We had Very pistols. They were distress and they shot green and red flares. I remember that we shot a few of those out when we heard the war had ended. And other ships were shooting them. We saw them in the distance. Even though the war was over, we still kept heading to Japan.

When you were headed across the Pacific, you were probably preparing for taking care of what were to be the huge numbers of casualties expected in the invasion of Japan.

Right. We had boxed supplies to set up a hospital ashore. And that's what we did when we got to Japan. We set up a little hospital unit with supplies. But we always kept two-thirds of

the staff aboard ship. Two-thirds of the nurses were aboard and only one-third were permitted to go ashore at any time. We were always staffed and ready.

Were you in Tokyo Bay when the surrender was signed aboard the *Missouri*?

Not for the surrender. That had taken place before we got there. It took us 5 weeks to get there from Hawaii. We went with a group of ships.

Do you remember when you got to Japan?

No, but it was in September.

Did you go to a port or did you stay offshore?

We anchored off the coast of Japan. We visited two small cities, one of which was Nagoya. While there, some Japanese reporters toured the ship. They were interested in meeting the nurses and what the hospital ship was all about. They arranged for a tour of nurses to go ashore and visit a hospital that trained nurses in Japan. That was very interesting. We observed a nurse scrubbing for surgery and she scrubbed 10 minutes with soap and water with a brush. Then she threw the brush in the sink and reached over and turned off the faucet with her hand.

The patient they were to work on was in obvious painful distress and he was in civilian clothes. They didn't bother taking his clothes off and putting on sterile drapes. They just did the surgery with his pants and shirt on. We were kind of alarmed as to what we thought was sterile and what wasn't.

While we were there, we heard a woman screaming, yelling, and threatening. She was upset at our being there and that shook us up a bit.

While you were anchored off Nagoya, when did you start seeing the prisoners of war?

That all happened a few weeks after. We set up the base hospital ashore and met seven trains. I recall waiting for the organization of the relief of the POWs. And finally the day came and our ship organized a temporary base hospital which was set up ashore. The showers were set up and an entire set of new clothes were available for all of the prisoners.

I believe the nurses were divided into three shifts. One shift at a time was ashore and the supervisor and six nurses or so. My shift was second or third. We wore our white ward uniforms but I think we turned back the cuffs. Our hair was covered with a wrap-around scarf. We did not wear a nurse's cap.

We met seven trains, as I recall. The train I met was in the dark. As it came to a stop, we called out a greeting. One of the boys said, "I've been waiting 5 years to see a white woman." I shined my flashlight on my face and said, "Well, she's not much to look at, but here she is."

However, later, one of them remarked that he would remember me because I was the first white woman he'd seen in 5 years.

What shape were these people in?

They were skin and bones without exception. They looked and smelled like death. As prisoners, they had been forced to work in the coal mines and they were starved. But you have to remember that the whole country of Japan was starving because we had surrounded them with our ships and didn't allow anything in, especially oil.

Did you note that any of them over-ate--that they tried to eat too much too, too soon?

Yes. I saw some of that.

Besides, seeing the men ashore in the hospital you set up, did you have any facilities aboard ship you used for the men?

Aboard ship we had set up additional folding cots in the aisles between the bunks as well as the hallways. The two psychiatric wards where I worked . . . My ward was a locked ward with 28 beds. The open ward had 35 bunks. But between us, we had 115 POW patients. At sick call one morning, the doctor asked a passenger if he was gaining weight. Yes. He had gained 8 pounds that day.

We found that we had to give each patient a meal pass to go to the mess hall just once. Other than that, they went two or three times and then upchucked. Then they wanted to go back again. We all agreed that the best thing was to see that they got three good meals a day.

We were also able to give them emergency dental and medical care. I was asked to have one patient go for dental care. When I called his name he did not respond. He was in an upper bunk. So I gently took hold of his wrist to check his pulse, and his arm fell alongside him as though he were not alive. I recall my horror at thinking that he had gone through all that he had and then he had died aboard our ship. But his eyes slowly opened and that was the way he responded. Apparently, that's the way he responded when he was in POW camp. No quick movements because any quick movement might be trouble.

Did you get to talk to any of these men?

Yes. When I was assigned to give a bed bath to one patient . . . and three of us had to do it in order to get the coal dust off his skin. They had not been permitted showers so they were just black with coal dust. These prisoners were from Australia, New Zealand, France, England, and three were from Holland. And there were Americans. They told me they had to work in the coal mines and weren't given food and not given water for showers. But the Japanese didn't care about them because they were having too many problems of their own.

Would you characterize these men as ecstatic to be free?

Yes. They were greatly relieved but were suffering, too. And, again, they were skin and bones.

How did you deal with getting them cleaned up? You say you gave bed baths?

Yes. For those who couldn't stand. Mostly we worked to get them so they could stand in the shower and use soap and water.

Then there were hospital ships of other countries to take their own POWs home. We did not have that many men aboard the hospital ship, only the sickest.

What kind of diseases did you encounter among the men?

No diseases. It was all starvation.

I would imagine they also had lice and other vermin.

We didn't find any lice and no disease that I recall. Those people had all died.

Did you take any of the Americans home on the *Consolation*?

No. They were flown to the Philippines, then to Hawaii, then to the States.

When did you come back on the ship?

I think it was in October or so. We came back to San Francisco but we didn't have any of our POWs aboard. They had all been sent home earlier. We had men from other ships but they hadn't been prisoners. After our initial homecoming, we shuttled back and forth between San Francisco and Hawaii. We took families of people who were stationed in Hawaii and we brought back the military women. I think we shuttled back and forth for 4 months. Then we came through the Canal again and back to the East Coast. We stopped at Guantanamo Bay. I was aboard a total of 13 months.

Did you have a career in the Navy or did you get out after the war?

When I had joined in 1942 I had to come on as regular Navy—USN—and not USNR—reserve. So I was kept in for 20 years. They wouldn't release me. Some of the nurses after the war got married and then they were released. But I didn't get married until 1957 and I had 5 years more to do to do my 20. But getting married didn't get me released. And I couldn't have children. And I didn't care. My husband was a football coach. He was at the University of Pennsylvania. And I was stationed at the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia. Then he began working with the Washington Redskins.

It's been 60 years since you had that experience in World War II on the *Consolation*. Do you think about it much anymore?

No. Not much. But when I try and remember, it comes back to me.